Readings
Module 5: Between - module readings

Reading 1: Biblical authority – modern-day interpretations of the Bible and its authority – Critical essay

Reading 2: First school RE: a guide for teachers

Reading 3: Bible Stories for American Children: Stifling the Power of Story

Reading 4: Early adolescents and biblical literature: Postmodern youth making meaning from ancient texts
**Reading 1:** Biblical authority – modern-day interpretations of the Bible and its authority – Critical essay
THE AUTHORITY of the Bible is a perennial and urgent issue for those of us who stake our lives on its testimony. This issue, however, is bound to remain unsettled and therefore perpetually disputatious. It cannot be otherwise, since the biblical text is endlessly "strange and new." It always and inescapably outdistances our categories of understanding and explanation, of interpretation and control. Because the Bible is "the live word of the living God," it will not compliantly submit to the accounts we prefer to give of it. There is something intrinsically unfamiliar about the book; and when we seek to override that unfamiliarity, we are on the hazardous ground of idolatry. Rather than proclaiming loud, dogmatic slogans about the Bible, we might do better to consider the odd and intimate ways in which we have each been led to where we are in our relationship with the scriptures.

At my confirmation, the pastor (in my case, my father) selected a verse for each confirmant, a verse to mark one's life. It was read while hands were laid on one's head in confirmation, read at one's funeral and many times in between. My father read over me Psalm 119:105: "Your word is a lamp to my feet/ and a light to my path."

Providentially, he marked my life by this book that would be lamp and light, to illumine a way to obedience and mark a path to fullness, joy and well-being.

Before that moment of confirmation, through baptismal vows and through my nurture in the faith, my church prepared me to attend to the Bible in a certain way. I am a child of the Prussian Union, a church body created in 1817 on the 300th anniversary of the year Luther posted his 39 theses on the door of the Wurtemberg church. The Prussian king, weary of the arguments about the Eucharist going on between Calvinists and Lutherans, decreed an ecumenical church that was to be open to diversity and based on a broad consensus of evangelical faith that intended to protect liberty of conscience. This church body brought to the U.S. a slogan now taken over and claimed by many others: "In essentials unity; in nonessentials liberty; in all things charity."

"In all things charity" became the interpretive principle that produced a fundamentally irenic church. The ambiance of that climate for Bible reading may be indicated in two ways. First, the quarrels over the historical-critical reading of the Bible, faced by every church sooner or later, were firmly settled in my church in 1870, when one seminary teacher was forced out of teaching but quickly restored to a pastoral position of esteem. Second, our only seminary, Eden Seminary, had no systematic theologian on its faculty until 1946, and things were managed in a mood of trustful piety that produced not hard-nosed certitude, but irenic charity.

My first and best teacher was my father, who taught me the artistry as well as the authority of scripture. After my confirmation came a series of others who further shaped me in faith. In seminary I had an astonishing gift of excellent Bible teachers, none of whom published, as perhaps the best teachers do not. Allen Wehrli, who had studied under Hermann Gunkel in Halle, taught us the vast density of the Bible's artistry, with attention to the form of the text. His pedagogy was imaginative storytelling—long before the work of G. Ernest Wright or Fred Craddock, Wehrli understood that the Bible is narrative. Lionel Whiston introduced us to Gerhard von Rad, who was just then becoming known to English readers. I have ever since devoured Von Rad, who showed us that the practice of biblical faith is first of all recital. I learned from Wehrli and Whiston that the Bible is essentially an open, imaginative narrative of God's staggering care for the world, a narrative that feeds and nurtures us into an obedience that builds community precisely through respect for the liberty of individual Christians.

After seminary, purely by accident, I stumbled onto James Muilenburg at Union Seminary in New York, arguably the most compelling Old
Testament teacher of his generation. He taught us that the Bible will have its authoritative, noncoercive way with us if we but attend with educated alertness to the cadences and sounds of the text in all its detail.

Since graduate school, I have been blessed by a host of insistent teachers—seminarians who would not settle for easy answers, churchpeople who asked new and probing questions, even other Bible teachers. But mostly my continuing education has come through the writing and witness of people who are empowered by the text to live lives of courage, suffering and sacrifice, people who have found this book a source and energy for the fullness of tree life lived unafraid.

This succession of teachers has let me see how broad, deep, demanding and generous is this text, how utterly beyond me in its richness. "A lamp to my feet and a light to my path . . ."

HOW EACH OF US reads the Bible is partly the result of family, neighbors and friends (a socialization process), and partly the God-given accident of long-term development in faith. Consequently, the real issues of biblical authority and interpretation are not likely to be settled by cognitive formulations or by appeals to classic confessions. These issues live in often unrecognized, uncriticized and deeply powerful ways—especially if they are rooted (as they may be for most of us) in hurt, anger or anxiety.

Decisions about biblical meanings are not made on the spot, but result from the growth of habits and convictions. And if that is so, then the disputes over meaning require not frontal arguments but long-term pastoral attentiveness to one another in good faith.

A church in dispute will require great self knowing candor and a generous openness among its members. Such attentiveness may lead us to recognize that the story of someone else’s nurture in the faith could be a transformative gift that allows us to read the text in a new way. My own story leads me to identify six facets of biblical interpretation that I believe are likely to be operative among us all.

**Inherency.** The Bible is inherently the live word of God, revealing the character and will of God and empowering us for an alternative life in the world. While I believe in the indeterminacy of the text to some large extent, I know that finally the Bible is forceful and consistent in its main theological claim. It expresses the conviction that the God who created the world in love redeems the world in suffering and will consummate the world in joyous well-being. That flow of conviction about God’s self-disclosure in the Bible is surely the main claim of the apostolic faith, a claim upon which the church fundamentally agrees. That fundamental agreement is, of course, the beginning of the conversation and not its conclusion; but it is a deep and important starting point. From that inherent claim certain things follow:

First, all of us in the church are bound together by this foundation of apostolic faith. As my tradition affirms, "in essentials unity." It also means, moreover, that in disputes about biblical authority nobody has the high ground morally or hermeneutically. Our common commitment to the truth of the book makes us equal before the book, as it does around the table.

Second, since the inherency of evangelical truth in the book is focused on its main claims, it follows that there is much in the text that is "lesser," not a main claim, but probes and attempts over the generations to carry the main claims to specificity. These attempts are characteristically informed by particular circumstance and are open to variation, nuance and even contradiction. It is a primal Reformation principle that our faith is evangelical, linked to the good news and not to biblicism. The potential distinction between good news and lesser claims can lead to much dispute.

Third, the inherent word of God in the biblical text is refracted through many authors who were not disembodied voices of revealed truth but circumstance-situated men and women of faith (as are we all) who said what their circumstances
permitted and required them to say of that which is truly inherent. It is this human refraction that makes the hard work of critical study inescapable, so that every text is given a suspicious scrutiny whereby we may consider the ways in which bodied humanness has succeeded or not succeeded in bearing truthful and faithful witness.

Fourth, given both inherency and circumstance-situated human refraction, the Bible is so endlessly a surprise beyond us that Karl Barth famously and rightly termed it "strange and new." The Bible is not a fixed, frozen, readily exhausted read; it is, rather, a "script," always reread, through which the Spirit makes all things new. When the church adjudicates between the inherent and the circumstance-situated, it is sorely tempted to settle, close and idolize. Therefore, inherency of an evangelical kind demands a constant resistance to familiarity. Nobody's reading is final or inerrant, precisely because the key Character in the book who creates, redeems and consummates is always beyond us in holy hiddenness. When we push boldly through the hiddenness, wanting to know more clearly, what we thought was holy ground turns out to be a playground for idolatry. Our reading, then, is inescapably provisional. It is rightly done with the modesty of those who are always to be surprised again by what is "strange and new."

**Interpretation.** Recognizing the claim of biblical authority is not difficult as it pertains to the main affirmations of apostolic faith. But from that base line, the hard, disputatious work of interpretation needs to be recognized precisely for what it is: nothing more than interpretation. As our mothers and fathers have always known, the Bible is not self-evident and self-interpreting, and the Reformers did not mean to say that it was so when they escaped the church's magisterium. Rather the Bible requires and insists upon human interpretation, which is inescapably subjective, necessarily provisional and inevitably disputatious. I propose as an interpretive rule that all of our interpretations need to be regarded, at the most, as having only tentative authority. This will enable us to make our best, most insistent claims, but then regularly relinquish our pet interpretations and, together with our partners in dispute, fall back in joy into the inherent apostolic claims that outdistance all of our too familiar and too partisan interpretations. We may learn from the rabbis the marvelous rhythm of deep interpretive dispute and profound common yielding in joy and affectionate well-being. The characteristic and sometimes demonic mode of Reformed interpretation is not tentativeness and relinquishment, but tentativeness hardening into absoluteness. It often becomes a sleight-of-hand act, substituting our interpretive preference for the inherency of apostolic claims.

The process of interpretation which precludes final settlement on almost all questions is evident in the Bible itself. A stunning case in point is the Mosaic teaching in Deuteronomy 23:1-8 that bans from the community all those with distorted sexuality and all those who are foreigners. In Isaiah 56:3-8 this Mosaic teaching is overturned in the Bible itself, offering what Herbert Donner terms an intentional "abrogation" of Mosaic law through new teaching. The old, no doubt circumstance-driven exclusion is answered by a circumstance-driven inclusiveness.

In Deuteronomy 24:1, moreover, Moses teaches that marriages broken in infidelity cannot be restored, even if both parties want to get back together. But in Jeremiah 3, in a shocking reversal given in a pathos-filled poem, God's own voice indicates a readiness to violate that Torah teaching for the sake of restored marriage to Israel. The old teaching is seen to be problematic even for God. The latter text shows God prepared to move beyond the old prohibition of Torah in order that the inherent evangelical claims of God's graciousness may be fully available even to a recalcitrant Israel. In embarrassment and perhaps even in humiliation, the God of Jeremiah's poem willfully overrides the old text. It becomes clear that the interpretive project that constitutes the final form of the text is itself profoundly polyvalent, yielding no single exegetical outcome, but allowing layers and layers of fresh reading in which God's own life and character are deeply engaged and put at risk.
Imagination. Responsible interpretation requires imagination. I understand that imagination makes serious Calvinists nervous because it smacks of the subjective freedom to carry the text in undeveloped directions and to engage in fantasy. But I would insist that imagination is in any case inevitable in any interpretive process that is more than simple reiteration, and that faithful imagination is characteristically not autonomous fantasy but good-faith extrapolation. I understand imagination, no doubt a complex epistemological process, to be the capacity to entertain images of meaning and reality that are beyond the givens of observable experience. That is, imagination is the hosting of "otherwise," and I submit that every serious teacher or preacher invites people to an "otherwise" beyond the evident. Without that we have nothing to say. We must take risks and act daringly to push beyond what is known to that which is hoped for and trusted but not yet in hand.

Interpretation is not the reiteration of the text but, rather, the movement of the text beyond itself in fresh, often formerly unuttered ways. Jesus' parables are a prime example. They open the listening community to possible futures. Beyond parabolic teaching, however, there was in ancient Israel and in the early church an observant wonder. As eyewitnesses created texts out of observed and remembered miracles, texted miracles in turn become materials for imagination that pushed well beyond what was given or intended even in the text. This is an inescapable process for those of us who insist that the Bible is a contemporary word to us. We transport ourselves out of the 21st century back to the ancient world of the text or, conversely, we transpose ancient voices into contemporary voices of authority.

Those of us who think critically do not believe that the Old Testament was talking about Jesus, and yet we make the linkages. Surely Paul was not thinking of the crisis over 16th-century indulgences when he wrote about "faith alone." Surely Isaiah was not thinking of Martin Luther King's dream of a new earth. Yet we make such leaps all the time. What a huge leap to imagine that the primal commission to "till and keep the earth" (Gen. 2:15) is really about environmental issues and the chemicals used by Iowa farmers. Yet we make it. What a huge leap to imagine that the ancient provision for Jubilee in Leviticus 25 has anything to do with the cancellation of Third World debt or with an implied critique of global capitalism. Yet we make it. What a huge leap to imagine that an ancient purity code in Leviticus 18 bears upon consenting gays and lesbians in the 21st century and has anything to do with ordination. Yet we make it.

We are all committed to the high practice of subjective extrapolations because we have figured out that a cold, reiterative objectivity has no missional energy or moral force. We do it, and will not stop doing it. It is, however, surely healing and humbling for us to have enough self-knowledge to concede that what we are doing will not carry the freight of absoluteness.

Imagination can indeed be a gift of the Spirit, but it is a gift used with immense subjective freedom. Therefore, after our imaginative interpretations are made with vigor in dispute with others in the church, we must regularly, gracefully and with modesty fall back from our best extrapolations to the sure apostolic claims that lie behind our extremities of imagination, liberal or conservative.

Ideology. A consideration of ideology is difficult for us because we American churchpeople are largely innocent about our own interpretive work. We are seldom aware of or honest about the ways in which our work is shot through with distorting vested interests. But it is so, whether we know it or not. There is no interpretation of scripture (nor of anything else) that is unaffected by the passions, convictions and perceptions of the interpreter. Ideology is the self-deceiving practice of taking a part for the whole, of taking "my truth" for the truth, of palming off the particular as a universal. It is so already in the text of scripture itself, as current scholarship makes clear, because the spirit-given text is given us by and through human authors. It is so because spirit-filled interpretation is given us by and through bodied authors who must make their way in the world—and in making our way, we
humans do not see so clearly or love so dearly
or follow so nearly as we might imagine.

There are endless examples of ideology at work
in interpretation. Historical criticism is no
innocent practice, for it intends to fend off
church authority and protect the freedom of the
autonomous interpreter. Canonical criticism is
no innocent practice, for it intends to maintain
old coherences against the perceived threat of
more recent fragmentation. High moralism is no
innocent practice, even if it sounds disciplined
and noble, for much of it grows out of fear and
is a strategy to fend off anxiety. Communitarian
inclusiveness is no innocent practice, because
it reflects a reaction against exclusivism and so
is readily given to a kind of reactive
carelessness.

There is enough truth in every such interpretive
posture and strategy--and a hundred others we
might name--to make it credible and to gather a
constituency for it. But it is not ideologically
innocent, and therefore has no absolute claim.

In a disputatious church, a healthy practice
might be to reflect upon the ideological passion
not of others, but of one's self and one's
cohorts. I believe that such reflection would
invariably indicate that every passionate
interpretive voice is shot through with vested
interest, sometimes barely hidden. It is
completely predictable that interpreters who are
restrictive about gays and lesbians will
characteristically advocate high capitalism and
a strong national defense. Conversely, those
who are "open and affirming" will
characteristically maintain a critique of
consumer capitalism, and consensus on a
whole cluster of other issues. One can argue
that such a package only indicates a
theological-ethical coherence. Perhaps, but in
no ease is the package innocent, since we
incline to make our decisions without any
critical reflection, but only in order to sustain the
package.

Every passionate vested interest has working in
it a high measure of anxiety about deep threats,
perhaps perceived, perhaps imagined. And

anxiety has a force that permits us to deal in
wholesale categories without the nuance of the
particular. A judgment grounded in anxiety,
anywhere on the theological spectrum, does not
want to be disturbed or informed by facts on the
ground. Every vested interest shaped by anxiety
has near its source old fears that are deep and
hidden, but for all of that authoritative. Every one
has at its very bottom hurt--old hurt, new hurt,
hurt for ourselves, for those we remember, for
those we love. The lingering, unhealed pain
becomes a hermeneutical principle out of which
we will not be talked.

Every ideological passion, liberal or conservative,
may be encased in scripture itself or enshrined in
longstanding interpretation until it is regarded as
absolute and trusted as decisive authority. And
where an ideology becomes loud and destructive
in the interpretive community, we may be sure
that the doses of anxiety, fear and hurt within it
are huge and finally irrepressible.

I do not for an instant suggest that no distinctions
can be made, nor that it is so dark that all eats
are gray. And certainly, given our ideological
passions, we must go on and interpret in any
ease. But I do say that in our best judgments
concerning scripture, we might be aware enough
of our propensity to distort in the service of vested
interests, anxiety, fear and hurt that we recognize
that our best interpretation might be not only a
vehicle for but also a block to and distortion of the
crucified truth of the gospel.

I have come belatedly to see, in my own ease,
that my hermeneutical passion is largely
propelled by the fact that my father was a pastor
who was economically abused by the church he
served, abused as a means of control. I cannot
measure the ways in which that felt awareness
determines how I work, how I interpret, who I
read, whom I trust as a reliable voice. The wound
is deep enough to pervade everything; I suspect,
moreover, that I am not the only one for whom
this is true. It could be that we turn our anxieties,
fears and hurts to good advantage as vehicles for
obedience. But even in so doing, we are put on
notice. We cannot escape from such passions;
but we can submit them to brothers and sisters
whose own history of distortion is very different from ours and as powerful in its defining force.

**Inspiration.** It is traditional to speak of scripture as “inspired.” There is a long history of unhelpful formulations of what that notion might mean. Without appealing to classical formulations that characteristically have more to do with “testing” the spirit (1 John 4:1.) than with “not quenching” the spirit (1 Thess. 5:19), we may affirm that the force of God's purpose, will and capacity for liberation, reconciliation and new life is everywhere in the biblical text. In such an affirmation, of course, we say more than we can understand, for the claim is precisely an acknowledgment that in and through this text, God's wind blows through and past all our critical and confessional categories of reading and understanding. That powerful and enlivening three, moreover, pertains not simply to the ordaining of the text but to its transmission and interpretation among us.

The spirit will not be regimented, and therefore none of our reading is guaranteed to be inspired. But it does happen on occasion. It does happen that in and through the text we are blown beyond ourselves. It does happen that the spirit teaches, guides and heals through the text, so that the text yields something other than an echo of ourselves. It does happen that in prayer and study believers are led to what is "strange and new." It does happen that preachers are led to utterances beyond what they set out to make. It does happen that churches, in councils, sessions and other courts, are led beyond themselves, powered beyond prejudice, liberated beyond convention, overwhelmed by the capacity for new risks.

**Importance.** Biblical interpretation, done with imagination willing to risk ideological distortion, open to the inspiring spirit, is important. But it is important not because it might allow some to seize control of the church, but because it gives the world access to the good truth of the God who creates, redeems and consummates. That missional intention is urgent in every circumstance and season. The church at its most faithful has always understood that we read scripture for the sake of the church's missional testimony.

But the reading of the Bible is now especially urgent because our society is sore tempted to reduce the human project to commodity. In its devotion to the making of money it reduces persons to objects and thins human communications to electronic icons. Technique in all its military modes and derivatively in every other mode threatens us. Technique is aimed at control, the fencing out of death, the fencing out of gift and, eventually, the fencing out of humanness.

Nonetheless, we in the church dare affirm that the lively word of scripture is the primal antidote to technique, the primal news that fends off trivialization. Thinning to control and trivializing to evade ambiguity are the major goals of our culture. The church in its disputatious anxiety is tempted to join the move to technique, to thin the Bible and make it one-dimensional, deeply tempted to trivialize the Bible by acting as though it is important because it may solve some disruptive social inconvenience. The Bible is too important to be reduced in this way because the dangers of the world are too great and the expectations of God are too large. What if liberals and conservatives in the church, for all their disagreement, would together put their energies to upholding the main truth against the main threat? The issues before God's creation (of which we are stewards) are immense; those issues shame us when our energy is deployed only to settle our anxieties. The biblical script insists that the world is not without God, not without the holy gift of life rooted in love. And yet we twitter! The Bible is a lamp and light to fend off the darkness. The darkness is real, and the light is for walking boldly, faithfully in a darkness we do not and cannot control. In this crisis, the church must consider what is entrusted peculiarly to us in this book.

Recently an Israeli journalist in Jerusalem commented on the fracturing dispute in Israel over who constitutes a real Jew, orthodox, conservative or reform. And he said about the
dispute, "If any Jew wins, all Jews lose." Think about it: "If anyone wins, everyone loses."

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**Reading 2:** First school RE: a guide for teachers
3. Primary RE and the Bible

Traditional RE - at all levels - was Bible based. Indeed its syllabus was the Bible, with various parts apportioned to different age ranges. Hence the subject was often called Scripture, rather than religious education or even religious instruction. There were reasons for this primacy of the Bible: it was assumed that it was the kingpin of our culture, a strong influence on our literature, art and architecture, and that it was the book of our religion and basis of our morality. It was also the only main subject of agreement between the parties drawing up the agreed syllabuses (p. 78). At a time when denominations still viewed each other with some suspicion it was the lowest common denominator of the widely diverse churches. Granted these assumptions it was therefore self-evident that a sound biblical education was necessary if one was to be a mature adult, aware of one’s cultural past and present and its roots in the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Two books and the problems they highlighted shattered the confidence with which these assumptions could be made any longer in RE and historically they mark the end of the simple RE = Bible equation. These were Harold Loukes’ Teenage Religion (SCM Press 1961), and Ronald Goldman’s Religious Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence (Routledge & Kegan Paul 1964), both resulting from surveys and studies conducted among children to try to see what they were absorbing, remembering and understanding about their RE. These two books are now something of a period piece but they both produced discoveries that shocked many readers at the time and subsequently:

(a) That despite all the years of Bible teaching the sheer factual ignorance of the Bible on the part of many children at school-leaving age was alarming. It appeared that the teaching they had received was ineffective at the most basic level 1 retention.

(b) That with younger children many of the stories they were being told and the concepts they were being given were actually harming their understanding of Christianity.

(c) Many children were openly sceptical about the way in which the Bible and the Christian faith had been presented to them. It was beyond the brief of the books to add another and disturbingly obvious point:

(d) That despite all the years of strongly Bible-based RE the new adult generations were not becoming Christian, and moreover that Christianity and the Christian ethic appeared to be declining.

In many ways the subsequent history of RE can be interpreted as a reaction to the situation these two books revealed. The possible main avenues of reaction were, after all, limited:

1. Accepting the thesis of the books to re-examine aims in RE, and how far Christianization was any longer appropriate, then to re-examine in the light of the new aims what the syllabus should be and the place of the Bible within it.

Or:

2. To argue from the Loukes-Goldman evidence that the real problem was insufficient Bible teaching.

This view still finds supporters, more often outside the teaching profession than within its ranks. If only we had more committed Christians in schools, teaching the Christian faith, then the moral degeneration of the nation would end etc. It seems to us a strangely Hitlerian view for Christians to be involved in, that young minds should be subjected to a barrage of Christianity with the real purpose of producing a more ordered society, using the Christian faith as a tool to make people ‘moral’, neglecting the child’s need to question, to compare, to look at other religious and non-religious currents in the adult society into which he is growing fast. Those who would use the classroom to present only Christianity and that biblically give the impression that they are
2. There is a sharp distinction to be made between using the Bible (text) and using biblical material. For primaries the text is rather formidable but the material can come alive via story-telling or mime or drama or visual aid or cartoon – graphic cut-out figures to attach to the board or wall as the story proceeds. Oral re-telling helps, as long as it does not distort the narrative into a merely secular story. In our age of video-recordings, cassettes, books, computers and all the technological aids to memory it is easy for us to forget that the ancients had to train and rely on human memory much more heavily. There is evidence to suggest that they were very skilled at this. In the same way much material that was later written and later still became part of the Bible as we know it circulated orally in its earliest form. Other parts were intended for reading aloud to groups, e.g. most of the letters to churches. These documents can live again in oral representation which can capture the imagination of children more swiftly than the written word. In contrast using the text poses problems of language, of chapters and verses which make it ‘odd’ in comparison with normal books, and many biblical accounts survive in a highly streamlined and compressed form. See, for example, almost any section of Mark’s gospel to illustrate this. So little of what might have been recorded is there. So much is left to the imagination, either the reader’s fantasy or the intelligent guess formed from a good working knowledge of New Testament conditions, town and country life, manners of speech etc. Another problem connected with use of the Bible text is that it is unusual these days, on educational grounds, to find thirty children sitting reading one text book as a formal class activity and the one-versus-child method renders the exercise unintelligible since the verse divisions are arbitrary, often falling mid-sentence or phrase. Occasional use of the text by older juniors in a project or research capacity is suggested elsewhere (p. 71) but in general one would expect biblical material to be presented in other ways at primary level.

3. The Bible must always be treated like any other book. Its authority cannot be assumed, and an approach centred on the ‘holy Bible’ brings trouble, because it puts children off. In later...
years each of us has to decide whether the Bible is holy or not, i.e. whether God speaks to us through it in a distinctive way. No one could accept that this was so because someone else had taught them that. It is a free decision, not an imposed pseudo-fact. Sometimes teachers involuntarily slide into reverential or parsonic voice tones when talking of God, Jesus or the Bible. This helps the child to feel how odd it all is, rather than to respect it. The Bible needs to be approached with care, avoiding all ‘God talks to us in the Bible’, ‘the Bible tells us how to live’ sort of moralistic or sermonic remark. It needs more matter-of-fact treatment:

The first Christians believed that . . .
Mark was trying to show how . . .
Turn to page 54 . . . (rather than St Mark’s Gospel, chapter four, verse five).

If children are to see the uniqueness of the Bible as they grow older they will be greatly helped by not having had its holiness rammed down their throat when they were younger.

4. The most important single thing for primaries to begin to grasp about the Bible is its role and influence. On the other hand it is ‘just’ a book. An examination of its sources, history, compilation, what it has meant and means today to Christians, Jews and Muslims, its cultural effect, and its use in worship reveal its importance in the history of the world. This emphasis can be developed via a small exhibition mounted by teacher and class to show where the Bible came from, how it was reproduced, translations, its influence on art, architecture etc. Biblical material can and should be integrated into the study of religions – it provides myth, folk tale, history, liturgy, seers, prophets, priests and many other strands and types that often form the subject of projects and RE. But at the same time the creation of the whole collection we call the Bible and its use and significance needs examination.

5. Never teach anything about the Bible that has to be untaught as children grow older. The teacher has to be fair to the complex nature of much of the material. She needs to study the text, know its key phrases and background information. This involves the use of commentaries (p. 41). Too often the temptation is to tell a Bible story without comment, e.g. Daniel in the lion’s den. (Dan. 6). This can be told in a vivid and exciting way and at a basic level children will enjoy it. But they are left with certain questions unanswered:

Did it really happen?
How did God work it?
Why doesn’t God work like that now?

Elementary background work with the class on the Jews and the Greeks and the Maccabean revolt (168 BC), itself interesting and exciting, would have put the book of Daniel in context for them. It could then be interpreted – as scholars strongly argue from the hints in the book itself – as a story to encourage persecuted Jews, clinging to what they saw as essential to worship and obedience of Jahweh, and in need of hope. Even at primary level older children could then see the book’s basic theme:

God cares for his people.
God will triumph.
There is hope.

They may then see the book itself as a sort of parable or sermon, or they may see it as history, but at least the seeds of unthinking scepticism have not been sown by a one-sided presentation. Provision of background information for children to see a book or event in context is very important – life and times, recent history, religious beliefs, sometimes geography connect with the material. How many, for instance, are told in the well-worn parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.25–37) that the priest passed by on the other side because he wished to obey the ritual law, which stated that contact with a dead man – which is what the traveller appeared to be – would make the priest unclean and invoke lengthy and involved cleansing regulations before full priestly duties could be resumed. Too often the presentation is trite: the unfeeling priest coldly passes by; the moral – help people in need. The real question this parable asks is more subtle: are we to put religious or personal principle above human need? Parables often suffer from
moralization in the classroom and are far more complex than at first they appear. Teachers tackling them with no prior knowledge ought to read Interpreting the Parables by A. M. Hunter (SCM Press 1964).

With all biblical material the necessary background has to be provided if the material is not to be raped. It is possible, however, to be at the other extreme and swallow in background in such a way that children never get to the material itself. Plasticine flat-roofed houses, oases, cotton wool sheep, a picture of the Sea of Galilee, the odd camel and all the rest of it can be as bad as stories for stories’ sake. Yet some teachers persist in background for background’s sake, perhaps because they fear to tackle the biblical events – there’s a sort of safety in plasticine houses. The Palestinian of Jesus is no more RE than the England of the Duke of Wellington unless it leads to a study of people or events or ideas.

In the light of all this it becomes clear that the acute practical problem for the primary teacher using the Bible is selection of material. There is a well worn path: Noah, Abraham, Jacob and Esau, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, the Judges, David and Goliath etc., puzzlingly punctuated by bits of Jesus at Christmas and Easter. These are time-honoured, exciting stories, but full of dangers for RE and surprisingly dominated by the Old Testament. Some of these stories have no connection with RE at all. David and Goliath is a case of this. An exciting story, the little chap wins, thus appealing to our support for the underdog, the bully is defeated – a theme for a school morality play, but in no way connected with religion unless one is going to argue that God favours little people! It is simply a propaganda-type hero story told about King David to show how good he was. It is even possible that Goliath was killed by one of David’s bodyguard, Elhanan (I Sam. 21.19) and that the story was later retold with the more famous David as hero.

Another primary favourite that falls into this category of failure as RE is Joseph. A great deal of effort and energy in primary schools goes into Joseph spectacles. Wall displays of ancient Egypt, models, museum visits and in more recent years the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat musical has brought another dimension to the Joseph industry. Again no one can deny that as a story the Joseph saga is entertaining. But again it has no connection with RE. How does it affect human values, religious or moral belief? Where does God come in? Is it any more than an ancient story about a modern figure: the Self Made Man? Certainly there are many elements in it that appeal to modern man – violence and grief (Gen. 37), sex (Gen. 38), fate and destiny (Gen. 40), trickery and cunning (Gen. 42-44) and the reassurance of the traditional happy ending (Gen. 46.1-7). Even the musical has to admit in one give-away line that ‘Any dream will do’. Similar in the way in which they are presented in the primary classroom are the stories of Joshua and the Judges. They come over as simple adventure stories, often aimed at junior boys. So two problems arise here. Many teachers seem to think that by presenting these narratives they are ‘doing RE’. This is not the case; simply because they appear in the Bible does not mean that they constitute religious education. Second, the narratives are often treated in a completely secular way, with all reference to God omitted. This may be well-intentioned, because to leave God in some of these narratives raises ethical questions about whether and why he wanted ‘his’ people to prosper and seems to have been willing to let others be eliminated in the process. But to omit God is not fair to the Bible, for whatever else we may be sure of we may be certain that the writers and compilers saw these as more than stories and more than chance events. God was at the heart of the events. He was not mentioned by accident or as an afterthought when they were written down. He was integral to the Hebrew understanding of events and life itself. To strike God out in the classroom representation is therefore, baldly, a lie – to claim to be teaching biblical material but not in fact to do so.

Yet again we are sensitive to another problem: that the picture of God given to children in the retelling of some of the narratives is unhelpful, even harmful. This situation arises commonly with the Noah narratives and with the Exodus.

What sort of God would destroy the world he created? Why did he curse the Egyptians with plagues?
Why did he drown the Egyptian army?
Does he act like that now? Why? Why not?
How could Moses hear him talking when I can't?
Why can adults talk to me so simply about God when I can't see any real evidence that he's around?

So the seeds of scepticism and misunderstanding are sown, ironically by well-meaning teachers. Literal interpretation of the Bible is assumed as the only course, or the only course suited to the young. Little or no attempt is made to deal with myth, in the case of the Flood, or the (then) contemporary beliefs about God and gods in the time of Moses. The teacher must scrutinize the picture of God she is putting over. Is it fair to the material? Do the children have sufficient background knowledge to understand it? Do they have other pictures with which to compare it?

It is equally necessary to deal with hero-figures in context. Jacob would be more a villain in modern terms and Joseph would be a very difficult brother to live with – a favourite, daddy’s pet, tactless enough to recount his dreams of superiority over his family (Gen. 37.5–11). Leaders should be presented without moral overtones, i.e. as leaders rather than heroes, not as people we ‘ought’ to admire now. Nor should their defects be ignored.

The situation is, then, that while biblical material can and should be used in RE, it is often the case that unsuitable material is selected, or used in such a way that it does not constitute RE. Examples of what could be used are given in Chapter 5, and in addition the following material, adapted to the children, lends itself to story telling, art and craft, drama, mime, dance, imaginative writing and all the other range of activities open to the primary teacher. Potentially they can be good RE if they are used in such a way as to illustrate beliefs about God or gods or meaning or the human values or faith in action and provided the teacher makes a real effort to be fair to the original, by her own study of text and commentary at the preparation stage.

Creation

Two stories with one point: God wants man to be here (Gen. 1.1–2.3 and 2.4–25). Present these as stories, not as historical or scientific fact, but stories with a purpose, to show that God cares for creation, wills man to be part of it, gives man a caring role towards it (conservation, stewardship, 1.29; 2.15). Emphasis on Man (Adam in Hebrew) as representing mankind. This is the RE point to come over – all the imaginative and illustrative work can be built around this.

Cain and Abel

Am I my brother’s keeper? (Gen. 4.1–16). This can be presented as an old story which raises the question of our responsibility for others. Some attempt has to be made to explain why, for no obvious reason, Abel’s offering was acceptable and Cain’s was not. It may be that the Hebrews saw Abel the shepherd as a representative of their nomadic life, whereas Cain the farmer symbolized the settled, agricultural life (and therefore deities) of Canaan.

The Tower of Babel

Man’s pride displeases God (Gen. 11.1–9). There are several strands in this narrative: languages, their origin and the divisions they represent, the possible origin of ziggurats (wedding cake temples!), but the main theme in the present form is clear. Man’s desire to see what God sees, to sit where God sits, to be almighty, will lead to trouble. Once again there is no need to preach this at children. The emphasis is rather on how the Hebrews saw it, how they thought about God, what sort of God they thought he was, what sort of human behaviour they saw as right.

Elijah and Naboth

God is involved in human social injustice; his servants challenge even kings (I Kings 21).

Chapter 5 discusses further examples. The four we mention here serve simply to show that biblical material can be used, that among it are some interesting stories, that they can be presented as RE by dealing with their major themes and that they can lead in to all the sorts of activities that some of the less rewarding narratives (from the RE point of view) are used for. God need
never be assumed in telling them. It is far easier for a child to see and accept that *Elijah believed that* God is involved in human social injustice and disapproves strongly. It is quite another matter to tell him as a fact that God *is* involved ... as if it were plain to all. By using the former approach the child will not feel got at and he may want to know why Elijah thought this, how others responded, what they thought God was like. The second approach reduces faith to fact. God must always be mentioned but needs never to be assumed as obvious fact.

4. **Infant RE**

RE with infants is beset by certain serious problems, which have led some teachers to argue that it is better not attempted, ‘left until they’re old enough’, whatever old enough means. We don’t agree that the situation is so bad that RE need be abandoned. Some things can be done, others must be done. Christmas alone calls for some comment by the teacher. The main problems in infant RE are:

1. What form RE should take within the very flexible and varied structure of the infant school day.

2. Selecting material which is suitable, worthwhile and within the conceptual range of the infant.

3. Defining aims which are actually within reach.

Many infant teachers feel lumbered with RE as a subject and the fact that it is compulsory – subject to parental withdrawal – can give it an odd and unnecessary position on the timetable. It may appear as the first thing each morning, actually written in as a subject slot, along with PE, which usually has to be written in because of timetabling use of the hall or gym. The casual observer looking at such a timetable might deduce a school of energetic religious fanatics! We would argue that there is nothing in the nature of RE which makes such treatment necessary; indeed to engage in RE in this way might very early communicate the idea that religion is something different and somehow unrelated to the rest of the child’s curriculum, i.e. to life.

But the organization difficulty with RE extends further than this. In most infant classes for at least part of each day, the amount
**Reading 3: Bible Stories for American Children: Stifling the Power of Story**

Bible Stories for American Children: Stifling the Power of Story

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The rich story and discourse of Hebrew Bible stories, their built-in gaps and ambiguities, their multivalent nature, and their examples of fallible people in the face of God’s grace, make them excellent resources for religious education. It is troubling, therefore, to find that many Christian children’s bible storybooks (or “children’s bibles”) available in the United States since the late nineteenth century retell these stories in ways that eliminate these very features, often reducing the stories to simplified morality tales with bible heroes serving as upstanding role models. In doing so, these children’s bibles both reveal and reinforce the church’s assumptions about the purpose of the religious education of children and the nature of the Bible and its role in religious instruction.

Over the past one hundred and twenty five years, children’s bible storybooks have been among the most popular and influential types of Christian publications in the United States. They are some of the most widely purchased Christian education resources for children and often serve as a child’s first impression of influential bible stories. This paper is based on a survey of hundreds of children’s bible storybooks available in the United States from the late 1800’s to the present. It will examine retellings of the story of Noah from Genesis and the ending of the book of Jonah in particular in order to illustrate some of the ways that many children’s bible storybooks stifle the religious education potential of the original stories.

CHANGING THE STORY OF NOAH

Filling Gaps

A growing number of bible scholars and translators have bemoaned the tendency of most English translations of the Bible to sacrifice the biblical authors’ rhetorical techniques and literary art for the sake of clarity (see Hammond 1987, 647; Fox 1995, ix-xi; Price 1996, 19; Alter 1996, xi-xii). This tendency to clarify and explain is even more prominent when the Bible is retold for children.

One such literary technique commonly employed in the Hebrew Bible is the use of built-in gaps within the stories themselves. These gaps are the parts of the story that are not filled in by the storyteller, but left to the imagination of the audience. These gaps have the advantage of being filled in different ways by different readers (Iser 1974, 280-282). By engaging these gaps, readers can participate in the story and can actively find and create meanings relative to their own context and experience. Experts on educating children in literature note that children are very adept at using the gaps in stories (Evans 1987, 33-35). Although children may not have as much life experience with which to connect the stories they hear, each new story they encounter can serve as an experience in itself and one to which they can connect the next story (Short 1993, 284-286). A number of religious educators have favored a similar approach to Bible study,
allowing children to encounter and react to the Bible for themselves (e.g. Furnish 1990; Gobbel and Gobbel 1986; Mitchell 1991).

While many authors of children’s bible stories claim that they are merely trying to simplify the Bible’s stories, they often expand them by filling in many of these gaps. The story of Noah in Genesis chapters 6 - 10 is a complex tale of God’s judgment and mercy. It is one of the most familiar of all Bible stories, but children may be surprised to discover that many aspects of the story that are familiar to them are not actually included in the book of Genesis itself. Like many Hebrew Bible narratives, the story of Noah in Genesis has many gaps. Genesis does not elaborate on the nature of the wickedness of the people, but simply reports that it was so. Likewise the book of Genesis does not say how long or how hard Noah worked building the ark, or whether or not other people mocked Noah or even noticed that he was building an ark. It simply reports that Noah “did all that God commanded him” (Genesis 6:22). Genesis does not say that Noah preached to the people, told them to change their wicked ways or warned them about the flood in any way. There is no description of the animals entering the ark in a line two abreast. Genesis does not describe the drowning of the other people or animals, whether or not they climbed to higher ground, or cried out to be let into the ark. It simply reports that God “blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground” (Genesis 7:23) and that only Noah and those in the ark were left. Many children who have heard or read children’s versions of the story of Noah (e.g. Comstock 1900, 4-6; White 1903, 24-28; Sangster 1905, 42-49; Hurlbut 1932, 8-11; Bedtime Bible Stories 1955, 14-15; Vos 1958, 14-17; Hodges 1963, 17-21; Martin 1964, 22-25; Horn and Cavanaugh 1980, 22-30), however, may be familiar with some or all of these plot points and assume them to be key parts of the Bible story. While some of these story points may be inferred by the text, the authors deny children of the educational benefit of filling these gaps for themselves and may stifle other imaginative readings of the story for the rest of their lifetimes.

From Sacred Story to Morality Tale

Cleanth Brooks and other New Critics of the 1940’s and 1950’s decried the practice of reducing the rich, multivalent nature of narratives or poetry into one theme or one lesson to be learned, calling it “The Heresy of Paraphrase” (Brooks 1947, 157-176). The Bible was not immune to this treatment. The forces of modernity had driven many to analyze and interpret texts rather than allow texts to speak for themselves as literature (see Frei 1974; Gold 2004). By the late 1800s the influential American Sunday School Union changed its bible-based curriculum from a focus on the content of the Bible story and on spiritual issues and instead began to a focus on specific moral virtues in order to continue to serve churches of a wide range of beliefs. As James C. Wilhoit explains, "The Union's focus on behaviorally defined character traits, as opposed to a well integrated Christian lifestyle, grows out of their conviction and desire to find a content that transcended denominational differences" (1987, 401). By the beginning of the 20th century many

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1 While it is true that in Jewish tradition there are stories that flesh out stories such as Noah’s, there is no evidence that the authors of these Christian children’s bible storybooks are drawing on them as authoritative sources.

2 Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA.
Bible study lessons and children’s bible story collections ended each Bible story with a short moral lesson. As early as 1920, religious educator Margaret W. Eggleston saw this trend and suggested the following:

When the story ends, STOP. A moral tacked to the end of a story is an outrage. If the story has been well told, it has taught its own moral much more effectively than a teacher can possibly tell it. And no teacher knows what lesson that story has taught to the child. Even the child does not know, but he has been taught the lesson and now needs time to make it a part of himself. (1920, 29)

The many potential meanings inherent in the complex story of Noah have coaxed children’s bible story authors to retell it in ways that emphasized the particular lessons that they thought were most important for children to learn. These authors may have thought they were simply making the story’s message clear to the children, but the variety of lessons they emphasize illustrates the problems inherent in “the heresy of paraphrase.” Some retellings, such as *Noah and the Ark: A Story About Being Thankful* (2005), emphasize lessons of thankfulness and hope. Others emphasize the lesson of doing right not wrong, focusing on how it was those who did wicked things who drowned (e.g. Foster 1886, 16) or that Noah was chosen because “he tried to do the things that are right” (*Bedtime Bible Stories* 1955, 14). But the social agenda of training children to become productive citizens led many more authors to use the story of Noah to teach the lessons of hard work and obedience to those in authority.

In her book, *The Bible for Children*, Ruth B. Bottigheimer describes a two-tiered tradition of children’s bibles from 1750 to 1850 in which children’s bibles written for the poor included hard work as part of their religious agenda while those written for the affluent did not (1996, 94-100). Bottigheimer notes that in the years that followed 1850 there emerged “single-class” bible story collections that promoted work and industry as virtues for all readers (1996, 91-102). Noah’s story is one that has long been retold in ways that subtly and not so subtly emphasize how long or how hard Noah worked to complete the ark (e.g. Comstock 1900, 4; Sangster 1905, 44; *Bedtime Bible Stories* 1955, 15; Martin 1964, 22). Indeed, Carolyn Nabors Baker’s recent book, *The Beginners Bible Tales of Virtue: A Book of Right and Wrong*, puts Noah’s story under the section titled “Work” (1995, 77-85). She writes:

Noah worked every day on the ark. He worked for many years. His sons helped him. Sometimes it was easy. Sometimes it was hard. Sometimes it was fun. Sometimes it was boring. But they knew they were doing God’s special work. Noah did everything God told him to do. He was happy because his work made his family strong. (1995, 81)

Obedience to authority figures such as God, parents, and other adults, is another virtue often emphasized in children’s bible storybooks. Many children’s bible authors have added explanations that highlight Noah’s work as an act of obedience to God. Annie White emphasized the virtue of obedience by explaining that even the animals obeyed God. "All these went into the ark; for God

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3For example, when the story of Abraham and Isaac is retold for children it is often not Abraham’s submission to God but rather Isaac’s obedience to Abraham that is emphasized, as in *The Boy Who Obeyed: The Story of Isaac* (Willard 1905).
made them gentle and obedient." (1903, 24). She went on to describe the people of earth as disobedient, and when the flood came "How the wicked people must have wished they had minded Noah!" (1903, 24) More recently Gilbert V. Beers ended his retelling by having Noah pray. "'Thank You, God,' Noah said. He was glad that he obeyed God" (1992, 31). Carolyn Larsen titled her section on Noah in My Favorite Bible Storybook for Early Readers “Obeying Pays Off” (2005, 30-35). In an earlier book, The Little Girls Bible Storybook for Mothers and Daughters, Larsen used the story of “Mrs. Noah” to teach that lesson that “A Woman of God is Obedient” (1998, 29), in this case to her husband as well as to God. The section is titled “Whatever You Say, Dear” (1998, 24). When Noah tells his wife about God’s command she responds,

    “With us? We’re going in the boat with those wild, smelly animals?” Mrs. Noah wondered.
    “We’d better. Flood coming you know.”
    “Mrs. Noah looked at the lions, bears, and spiders (did there have to be spiders?) She smiled and took Noah’s hand, “Whatever you say, dear.” (1998, 28)

Later in the retelling we are told, “Mrs. Noah kept busy cleaning up after the animals and keeping her family fed and the clothes cleaned” (1998, 32).

Some of these lessons of thankfulness, doing what is right, obeying God, and working hard may be valid lessons children can learn from the story of Noah. Unfortunately, retelling the story in a way that distills it into a single lesson is problematic for religious education. A child who happens to be open to learning a lesson about being a righteous person, for example, may become closed to hearing that lesson from the Noah story if she or he first experiences the story retold in a way that implies that hard work is its one true lesson. This “one lesson” approach to the Bible’s stories is distressingly common in Sunday School curricula today, but it is perhaps even more troubling when a lesson is integrated into a children’s bible story, suggesting that the Bible story itself is a fable with just one built-in moral to the story.

Making Noah Age-Appropriate

Christian educators have long debated whether or not Bible study itself is age-appropriate for children. Some have debated whether or not the Bible is beyond a child’s understanding and experience (see, for example Goldman 1965, 7; Gobbel and Gobbel 1986, 5-10; Berryman 1991, 136-144). But it was the sexual and violent content of some Bible stories that concerned many others (see Smither 1960).

One such concession to age-appropriateness is the omission from most current children’s bibles of the story of a drunken naked Noah who is discovered by his sons in Genesis 9:20-27. Bottigheimer notes that this story was common in children’s bibles of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, however, Bible stories such as this one that dealt with sex were slowly being removed as inappropriate content for children’s bibles and replaced by stories that emphasized the virtue of work (1996, 103-115; see also Neidhart 1968, 118).
A shift in the sensibilities of what is appropriate for children is also evident in the way children’s bible stories treat stories of God’s judgment. A number of earlier children’s bible versions of the Noah story contain graphic illustrations of naked children and adults trying to escape the flood and frightening descriptions of those outside of the ark clamoring for higher ground and crying out in horror for help before being swept away by the waves (Foster 1873, 1911, 19-21; Hadley 1890’s, 14-15; Hodges and MacLean 1963, 20-21). Today, however, an increasing number of children’s bibles focus on how God saves Noah to the exclusion of any mention that others drown or that it was God who caused the flood. The stories focus instead on God as the one who keeps us safe. Religious educators of children will differ in how they choose to handle the story of God’s judgment on humankind in the story of Noah. In children’s bible story versions, however, it seems that the implied lesson has shifted from a cautionary tale about how God punishes us if we are wicked to a story assuring us that God will keep us safe no matter what.

From Ancient Narrative to Illustrated Children’s Book

One of the most dramatic developments in children’s bible stories throughout the past one hundred and twenty five years is the number of children’s bibles written for an increasingly younger readership. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, before the time of translations such as the New International Version or New Century Version, the majority of children’s Bibles were written for young readers as alternatives to the King James Version of the Bible. These versions eliminated archaic and confusing language, set the type into one column, added the occasional illustration to keep the reader’s interest, and eliminated passages that were deemed too boring, unimportant, or inappropriate for children. Around 1945 advancements in the technology necessary to reproduce color illustrations (see Townsend 1987, 304) provided the means, and the onset of the postwar baby boom provided the market, for a large increase in the number of picture books published for young children. Bible picture books became available for children of grade school age and even younger, leading today to popular versions such as The Toddler’s Bible (Beers 1992), The Beginners Bible for Toddlers (Baker and Helms, 1995), Baby Blessings Baby’s Bible (2004), Baby’s First Bible (1996), and The Baby Bible Storybook (Currie 1994).

For some well-known children’s book illustrators, the stories of the Bible serve as a pre-text to fuel their artistic imaginations (e.g. Pinkney 2002; dePaola 1990), but the majority of children’s bibles claimed the goal of religious education by introducing children to the actual stories of the Bible.

Today most of these picture book bibles feature the ubiquitous image of Noah and his wife with a host of modern day zoo animals facing the reader with large grins on their faces while spilling over the edges of a small boat. This is the image commonly used as the cover of children’s bible story collections. Often a few of the animals, almost always smiling, are doing something cute and anthropomorphic such as folding their hands in prayer along with Noah and

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4 The story of Elisha and the She-bears, for example, is present in many late 19th century and early 20th century children’s Bibles (Foster 1886, 95; Stirling 1920’s, 220; Mutch 1922, 167; Egermeier 1923, 305; Brown 1926, 13) but only present in the most comprehensive of children’s Bibles today.
his wife (Beers 1992, 31), helping to hang out the laundry (Beck 1993, cover), dancing for joy on two feet (Hollingsworth 1998, 39) or even playing a game of marbles with Noah (Thomas 1994, 34-35).  

The story of taking a fun boat ride with anthropomorphized animal friends is one that is age-appropriate, fun and exciting for young children. Religious educators, however, may wish to ask if it is appropriate to call that story “Noah’s ark.” Do such retellings still resemble the canonical stories enough to be presented as the Bible story itself? 

One might expect that those bible storybooks marketed toward a more conservative readership would stay the closest to the Bible’s text and avoid portraying the biblical story as a cartoon with smiley animals for fear of trivializing the story or making it seem unrealistic, while those publishers with a more liberal or secular readership might feel free to take more liberties with the stories told in the Bible. The trend, however, seems to be the opposite direction. Publishers with a wider or more mainline readership tend to treat the stories as realistic ancient stories with realistic or impressionistic illustrations while some publishers with a more conservative readership tend towards cartoon animals. In these cases, perhaps the goal of having children engage in the Bible friendly and inviting ways takes precedence over conveying the ancient narrative’s sense of realism, awe and wonder. 

CHANGING THE ENDING OF THE BOOK OF JONAH

The book of Jonah in the Hebrew Bible ends with an unanswered question. The story of how Jonah runs away from God, is thrown into the sea, swallowed by a great fish, spewed onto dry land, and goes on to prophesy to Nineveh is well known. Perhaps less well known to many children is the fourth chapter of Jonah in which a bitter Jonah is angry with God for sparing the repentant Ninevites. Jonah sits on a hill outside of Nineveh and tells God that he is angry enough to die. God responds by asking Jonah, “And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?” (Jonah 4:11b)

That is where the canonical book of Jonah ends, with a bitter prophet on a hillside and a question left unanswered. The question challenges Jonah’s (and the readers’) view of God’s mercy. As commentator Elizabeth Harper puts it, “The book is about God’s staggering compassion on all people everywhere, even those who seem furthest from love” (Harper 2002, 462). Like the Gospel of Mark in the New Testament, the book of Jonah ends with what literary critics call an ultimate gap. The ending does not resolve the plot of the book of Jonah, but on the level of discourse it has a brilliant effect on readers. As Phyllis Trible writes: 

Abruptly the story of Jonah stops, but it does not end. The divine question awaits an answer. In pondering the matter, the reader who journeyed with Jonah begins to get

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5 In his introduction to The True Story of Noah’s Ark, Tom Dooley bemoans fanciful retellings and claims to go back to the Bible “to get an accurate account” (2003, 4), but even his book includes a realistic illustration by Bill Looney depicting one of Noah’s sons motioning to a woolly mammoth who is lifting lumber in his tusks to help build the ark (2003, 17).
the point. The reader is Jonah; Jonah is the reader. So the open-endedness of the last verse invites self-understanding and self-transcendence. The story subverts the reader. (1996, 525-526)

With this ending the book of Jonah provides some good examples of what literary critics call “defamiliarization” in which the familiar is made unfamiliar (Iser 1974, 282). Pagan sailors and even wicked Ninevites humbly submit to the call of Yahweh while the Hebrew prophet Jonah is disobedient and bitter. There is great religious education potential in this story. The story can serve to challenge children to explore ways in which they, as religious people, are sometimes not as merciful as God calls them to be. Religious educators can call children to respond to the story by exploring ways in which they might see faith in unfamiliar places.

The ultimate gap at the end of the book offers another excellent opportunity for religious education. Learners can be asked to use their imaginations to role-play what happened next. How might Jonah have responded to God’s question? Did he stay bitter? How might God respond to Jonah’s response? Learners could simply be asked to journal about what they think may have happened next and to imagine both a Jonah who repents and one who becomes further entrenched in his anger and resentment.

Unfortunately, while many children’s bibles follow the text of Jonah closely, many others close off these questions to the reader. Many bible storybook authors appear to feel compelled to achieve three goals: to simplify the story, to teach children a clear moral lesson, and to redeem biblical characters as positive role models. This compulsion finds an interesting expression in the way that many children’s bibles change the ending of Jonah.

One common strategy that children’s bible storybooks use to accomplish all three of these goals simultaneously is simply to leave out chapter four of the book of Jonah. First of all, by ending the story of Jonah at Jonah chapter 3 verse 3, with Jonah finally obeying God and going to Nineveh, or at the end of chapter 3 with the Ninevites also obeying God and repenting, the story is given a tidy satisfying conclusion with no open ended questions or gaps in the story (see, for example, Taylor 1992, Bruno and Reinsong 2006, 127; see also Roncace 2004, 7).

Secondly, by omitting chapter four these stories teach a clear and compelling lesson of obedience. While some retellings of Jonah highlight a lesson of God’s mercy and forgiveness (Sangster 1905; Vos 1934, 416; Hadley circa. 1890, 150; Maxwell 1955, 184; Allen et. al. 1973, 198), more are retold in ways that emphasize that Jonah learned the importance of obeying God. Children’s bibles created for younger readers make this lesson very clear by adding morals to the end of the story such as, “This time, Jonah obeyed God” (Beginners Bible 2005, 264), “Jonah did the right thing” (Baker and Helms 1995, 123), “Thank You, Lord, for helping Jonah decide to do what You told him” (Taylor 1956, 226), “The people listened to him, and they learned to do what God said. Just like Jonah” (Lloyd-Jones 1998, 13) or that after the fish spit Jonah up “NOW Jonah went where God said!” (Beers 1992, 219). Indeed The Beginners Bible Tales of Virtue: A Book of Right and Wrong uses Jonah as their example of “Obedience” (Baker 1995, 49-57).

Finally, by ending the story before chapter four, children are not left with the image of a bitter angry Jonah, but rather one who is happy and a good role model for children. While
chapter four of the book of Jonah suggests that Jonah is neither happy for the Ninevites, nor happy with God. *The Beginners Bible Tales of Virtue* includes a picture of Jonah and the king of Nineveh hugging while both are smiling (Baker 1995, 56) and ends with the image of a smiling Jonah with God’s disembodied hand on his shoulder (Baker 1995, 57). Marcia Williams, in *Jonah and the Whale* writes, “When God saw this, he was happy to spare them. Jonah and everyone who lived in Nineveh rejoiced” and shows an illustration of Jonah smiling and dancing with the Ninevites (1989, last page). These images leave Jonah in a much better light than does the Hebrew Bible account.

Perhaps even more noteworthy are the surprising number of children’s bible storybooks that include chapter four of Jonah but then fabricate an ending that redeems Jonah. There are more than a dozen examples of versions that end with God’s question to Jonah, but then add variations of “now Jonah finally understood” or “Jonah then agreed that God was right” and often include final illustrations of a happy or reverent Jonah that do not leave Jonah in a negative or ambiguous light (e.g. Marshall 1921, 146; *Bedtime Bible Stories* 1955, 170; Hodges and MacLean 1963, 520; Martin 1964, 270; Horn and Cavenaugh 1980, 199; Davidson 1984; Kennedy 1991, 98; Alexander 1991, 160; Yenne and Jacobs 1993; Amery 1998, 71; Nodel 1993; Adams 1994, 63; Parker 2001, 237; *Read Together Treasury Bible Stories* 2003, 95). These authors are apparently so compelled to make Jonah into a role model for children that some add onto the text with no indication to the reader that they are veering from the account in the Hebrew Bible.6

If children read or hear these versions of the story, they are not challenged to answer God’s question for themselves. Do they believe God should be merciful to everyone, even the enemies that have wronged us the most? They are not asked to reflect on a religious leader who was neither obedient nor merciful while those outside their faith were. By reading these versions a simple pat ending to the story can become set in their minds and the religious education potential of the story may be stifled.

**SELECTING AND PUBLISHING CHILDREN’S BIBLE STORIES**

The concerns raised above serve to call into question the value of retold bible story collections. With the availability of modern translations with lower reading levels such as the *International Children’s Bible: New Century Version* and “America’s Best Selling Kids Bible” *The NIV Adventure Bible* now available, are illustrated collections of retold children’s bible stories helpful at all? This is an important question and one that is beyond the scope of this paper to answer adequately.

There are some children’s bible story collections such as *The Children’s Bible* (1962), *The Kingfisher Children’s Bible* (Pilling 1993), and *The Children’s Illustrated Bible* (Hastings 1994) and others that avoid many of the concerns raised in this paper. These editions share several

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6 Again, while it is true that in Jewish tradition there are stories that flesh out the story of the ending of Jonah’s life, there is no evidence that the authors of these Christian children’s bible storybooks are drawing on them as authoritative sources.
commendable characteristics that may guide those selecting children’s bibles for use and those preparing new ones for publication.

1. They respect the Bible storyteller’s craft by staying close to the language of the Bible itself and avoid filling gaps and adding morals to the end of the stories.
2. In their text and illustrations they respect the art of the biblical storytellers by allowing bible characters to be imperfect instead of changing them into sanitized role models.
3. These versions tend to be for children at least eight years of age. Younger readers may need the guidance of an adult or older child to read the book, which may be a benefit in itself.
4. The illustrations convey a sense of awe and wonder rather than fanciful cartoon images and therefore better reflect the nature of most biblical narratives. This does not mean that the artists do not use creativity in their illustrations, but that they avoid trivializing the biblical stories with standard cartoon images.7
5. The people in the stories are depicted as of near eastern descent rather than the common practice of portraying them as white Nordic characters.8
6. Many of these versions engage an interfaith committee of Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Jewish scholars as consultants who can point out concerns that authors and illustrators may not have recognized.

Children’s bible storybooks are often brightly colored, fun, and child-friendly books created with the best of intentions, but it is important for religious educators to ask whether these retellings of the Bible’s stories are helpful resources for religious education, or whether they stifle the power of the Bible stories themselves.

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7 For younger readers, illustrations such as those by Ulises Wensell in The Reader’s Digest Bible for Children (Delval 1995) can be fun and engaging and at the same time can convey a sense of awe and wonder.

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**Reading 4: Early adolescents and biblical literature: Postmodern youth making meaning from ancient texts**

EARLY ADOLESCENTS AND BIBLICAL LITERATURE: POSTMODERN YOUTH MAKING MEANING FROM ANCIENT TEXTS.

Abstract
In one sense, the Bible is part of our contemporary western culture, being the foundation upon which many of our rules, morals and judgements are based. In another sense, it is alien to our culture, being an ancient text based upon a culture of two thousand years ago. For adolescents operating within Catholic schools, it is a foundation text and a major resource for both academic study and religious inspiration. This work particularly focuses upon the ability to make sense of biblical material by early adolescent students (aged about 11 – 12 years) in Catholic schools.

Early adolescents are acquiring new forms of knowledge. They are developing within a scientifically conscious world where traditional knowledge has altered, a larger variety of knowledge providers than previously has developed and a number of conflicting messages are being imparted to them. Their ability to process existing knowledge has changed due to the increased complexity of their abstraction and relationship skills. They tend to interpret biblical literature from a perspective that takes into account a number of factors relating to their personal world.

The danger is that, as early adolescents develop and refine their meaning-making abilities, they will either reject biblical material as being merely myths and stories and out of step with the reality of their world, or will adopt a fundamentalist approach that views biblical literature as literal truth. Religious education courses must include critical studies of biblical texts alongside religious approaches so that they receive a balanced view of how to interpret this ancient document within their own culture.

The nature of biblical literature
The mythical-literal study of scripture, congruent with premodern cultural life, is one way that biblical texts have been interpreted in prior eras and continue to be interpreted in contemporary times. The study of religious texts, and for Christians the Bible in particular, is one way that people make sense of their religious world and their experiences of God. Sokol (1988) demonstrates how current Christian understandings have been compounded by an inability to explain the traditional reliance on religious language to a society intellectually formed by rationality, empiricism and historical consciousness. Many people in contemporary society struggle to make sense of meanings contained within the Bible and fail to avoid common misinterpretations. Its cultural bases are unfamiliar to readers and its literary methods derive from a civilisation to which contemporary people no longer relate. In the time prior to the development of rational and scientific thought, premodern society tended to construe the Bible’s multitude of literature forms as historical fact, misinterpreting the essence of its texts (Bruggemann, 1997). The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum (1965), sought to examine understandings of how God is revealed to people, especially in the light of contemporary biblical scholarship. With growing interest in biblical literature, interpretation must take into account the many and varied ways that this ancient text may be interpreted credibly in post-modern times.

Contemporary readers have inherited reflections of ancient writers who were struggling to express their beliefs of a particular view of Ultimate (Eliade, 1959). Brown (1989) illustrates how ancient biblical writers explored and exposed ultimate truths without reference to empirical science to which contemporary people are accustomed. To read ancient biblical material with an uncritical mind and to accept at face value the narratives contained within the Bible is to do a disservice to the efforts of the early theologians and discount the enormity of their contributions to the development of the scriptures. Such a position also displays narrow-mindedness and a degree of fundamentalism on the part of the contemporary reader not to recognise the contradictions contained within.

Present western culture has been labelled postmodern, indicating a change to previously stable ways of thinking. This is to distinguish it from premodern eras within which the Bible was written and interpreted, and the modern era which existed from about the eighteenth century until the latter twentieth century. World-views are constantly changing (Crotty, 1996) and this instability can be reflected in biblical analysis. Contemporary readers may receive benefit from employing multiple angles of vision available via a large array of methods of biblical interpretation. Techniques of biblical criticism, such as historical critical or socio-cultural approaches, attempt to make sense of scripture by examining the author and the text in the context of ancient times. Simultaneously, the symbolism reflected in the narrative nature of much of the biblical material has become apparent. Ancient and original contexts possessed a certain
symbolism related to their sacred stories, a symbolism that has lost its significance in mainstream postmodern society. Post-Enlightenment society, with its emphasis upon the precise terminology of empirical science has generally lost sensitivity to the symbolic language of metaphor, vision, myth and indigenous narrative (Riceour, 1981). Study of ancient texts within appropriate frameworks can help to determine both the original and contemporary meanings of texts – who wrote them and for what purpose; who were the intended readers or hearers; what value do these texts have for contemporary readers or hearers, and how do they make sense of this material.

The nature of postmodern early adolescents
There is evidence that, in western society, young people are entering adolescence at an earlier age than their forebears (Eyers, Cormack & Barratt, 1993). The traditionally accepted view of puberty signalling the onset of adolescence has begun to soften. The ages of about 11 and 12 now include many of the characteristics traditionally associated with the early teenage years (Berk, 1996) and bring a wide array of challenges for young people as they leave behind the childhood stages of their lives. A multitude of changes occur within early adolescents as they embark upon the pathway to adulthood.

Young people in the age range of 11-12 years are generally experiencing vast changes in their physical and intellectual growth. Not only is body shape changing but new interpersonal relationship issues are emerging. A major reorganisation of awareness of themselves and their own special identities (Erikson, 1950) coupled with a deeper understanding of the psychological self (Rosenburg, 1979) gives early adolescents the chance to see themselves and the world in which they operate differently from previously. They learn at an early age what features of our society are encouraged and rewarded and which ones are given limited acknowledgement. They are also very adept at identifying what is, and what is not, scientifically plausible (Pilch, 1999). They exist within a rational, industrialised, technological and historically conscious world, even more advanced than previous post-Enlightenment eras, where the concept of what constitutes acceptable, valid and reliable knowledge has been filtered through contemporary, scientific understandings.

The modernity of today’s early adolescent
Early adolescents today face a number of significant challenges. They are members of a postmodern, western culture and, while the bible features generally as a foundational component of contemporary life, their lives have little in common with the culture in which the Bible was written. They come from a range of linguistic, cultural and social backgrounds, bringing their own and differing prior knowledge and experiences. The swift and continuous nature of change, the rapid expansion of the available knowledge base and the cultural plurality of society have transformed traditional ways of operating. The impact of globalised cultures has resulted in new images and messages circulating around the world and merging with established traditions to shape new meanings and cultures. Knowledge is now generated and dispersed in multiple and increasingly accessible ways, resulting in young people developing their own voice and challenging the voices of traditional authority figures. Furthermore, they are beginning to realise that there are other ways in which to define their world-view, ways that may differ from those of significant others in their lives. They are now able to acquire this knowledge from a variety of non-traditional sources, as opposed to previous traditional knowledge providers such as their parents, their teachers and the church.

Development of rational meaning-making systems within early adolescents
Early adolescents stand at the threshold of abstract thought (Piaget, 1952), a period in their development where previously accepted responses may no longer be sufficient to satisfy their rapidly developing intellects. A number of child development theories exist (Piaget, 1952, Bruner, 1963, Goldman, 1967-69, Vygotsky, 1978 to name but a few), bearing testament to the richness of the field in describing changes in their intellectual capacity. Piaget (1952) provides a structure of thinking comprising stages which suggests that early adolescents in western culture may undergo a significant transition in thinking capabilities about age 12 years where concrete operational thought gives way to more abstract cognitive processes. Goldman (1967) suggests that, although about ten years of age marks the beginnings of verbal abilities to distinguish between literal transcription of factual truth and the use of myth to convey an abstract concept, a significant increase in understanding of religious and symbolic language in written forms occurs around 12/13 years. Bruner (1963) describes the processes of creative problem solving in these early adolescent years whilst Vygotsky (1978) shows how socialisation and language practices impact upon cognitive development. Lovat and Smith (1995) introduce the term "meta cognition", the action of examining the thinking and learning process, which supports the development of critical thinking skills in students. Biggs and Moore (1993) outline a constructivist view of learning which examines the complexity and interactivity of the learning process. The ideas of Habermas (1972) and critical theory encourage the development of critical thinking skills via open-ended enquiry in which learners are in control of
their own learning via a constant critique of authority and the officially recognised educational diet. Other cognitive theorists (Siegler, 1986; Flavell, 1992) point to a lack of evidence concerning stage theory in favour of a graded and loosely constructed emergence of a wide variety of insights into how children think. Such ideas tend to favour a more continuous development, referred to as "information processing". These theories, operating together with considerable harmony and overlap, indicate the increasing development of the early adolescent's intellectual capacity and the potential for increase in their abilities to make meaning from their experiences.

Development of religious understandings in early adolescents

During early adolescence students are becoming aware that there are ways of thinking and expressing themselves religiously. Goldman (1967) employed Piaget's stage theory in his analysis of children's religious ideas and found a similar stage development process where mental age and cognitive ability are key factors in the development of religious understanding. He suggests that by the age of ten years students may be able to begin to distinguish between myth, legend, allegory, parable and interpretative history, although only yet at the verbal level. This appears to be close to the age when crude anthropomorphic ideas of God are receding, to be replaced with a dualistic way of seeing God's activity in the natural world, one theological and one scientific. His slightly higher chronological age of about 13 years as necessary for children to readily grasp religious ideas is a possible consequence of religious understanding being dependent upon and following cognitive development. Goldman (1969) concluded that individuals needed to have lived long enough to have experienced the real problems of the human condition before one could see the relevance of religion.

Goldman's research sparked a number of studies designed to test his methodology and conclusions. During his era, his findings were replicated in varying degrees by Kingan (1969), MacCuish (1970) and Cater (1976). Nye and Carlson (1984) examined three separate Christian traditions to conclude that religious development depended upon a general cognitive development, supporting the view that age 10/11 was about when children could comprehend adequately a concept of God. Hyde (1990) summarised a number of later findings (Howe, 1978; Miles, 1983) which maintained that cognitive dimensions show clear developmental trends with mental age.

Fowler (1989) was concerned with faith as an activity of knowing, constructing and interpreting experience through which humans create meaning in their lives. Building upon insights from Piagetian stage theory he devised a structure that he used to organise responses to questions. Between the ages of approximately 6-12 years children pass through the mythic-linguistic stage where they are keen to learn the stories, beliefs and observances of their group while beginning to think logically and concretely. While still remaining open to imaginative and creative material they begin to insist that factual claims be proven, paving the way for the next stage (synthetic-conventional) where contradictions in the community's stories become a focus. This is the age group upon which this discussion is focused, highlighting a distinction between religious thinking and critical, rational thought.

Robinson (1983) accepts that capacity for analytical thought does not generally appear until early adolescence because certain parts of the thinking process are seen in understanding logical relationships but he argues for some consideration to be given to the holistic curriculum of childhood where logical constructivism plays no part. Strict chronological stages are deemed inappropriate because religious experience is often personal and particular, but rarely predictable nor controllable. Too often, developmental theories regard children's experiences as inadequate, the model seeing them as insufficiently developed but somewhere on the journey to completeness, as found in the mature adult. Vygotsky (1986) maintains that all learning has a previous history embedded in children's development and experiences. Robinson (1983) assumes that young people of varying ages have a natural capacity for insight, imagination and understanding, experiences that do not need to be developed into some higher form to be understood. It seems unfounded that adult learning and education have been afforded higher credibility and set over against the value of childhood learning and education.

Hay and Nye (1998) criticise the reliance upon cognitive ability in assessing religious understanding and lament the scarcity of research concerning children's spirituality compared to cognitive studies. Perhaps this is in some way due to a perceived neglect of spiritual aspects of children's development in our postmodern era (Beck, 1986). Prior to Goldman's work, two separate but related studies (Klingberg, 1959; Elkind & Elkind, 1962) suggested that a degree of religious awareness was present in childhood and youth. Elkind's (1978) research concluded that before the age of 11/12 years most children were unable to understand religious concepts as adults could, but instead gave meanings to them that reflected their own world-views. Support comes from Tamminen (1991) who noted very high levels.
of reported religious experience in children up to the ages of 12/13 while Coles (1992) warns that it is a mistake to give priority to intellectual operations when attempting to understand children’s spirituality. These studies suggest that spiritual awareness may be more common in early adolescents than Goldman appreciated. While they may not experience existential issues in the same way that older adolescents and adults do, a case can be made for them experiencing in their own way (Berryman, 1991). Moore (1988) shows how the needs of early adolescents for self-esteem and identity formation are to some extent experienced by the image of Jesus being personally interested in each individual. The implication is that children do possess profound religious experiences that only in later life can be named, described, explained or comprehended. Hay and Nye (1998) posit that, as children come to learn more about, and become socialised into, the scientific tradition of western culture and its associated religious skepticism, a suppression of their natural spirituality occurs, causing it to become less explicit and disconnected from their world. This would seem to account for any perceived dichotomy between their ability for religious thinking and their critical, rational thinking as shaped by their existence within post-modern society.

Language and literacy development in early adolescents

Vygotsky (1962, 1978) suggests that cooperative dialogues between children and other more knowledgeable members of society enable children to acquire the ways of thinking and behaving that represent the community’s culture. Although language development is largely complete by the end of childhood, subtle but important changes take place during early adolescence. These changes are largely influenced by cognitive changes, particularly their improved capacity for reflective thought and abstraction. As their vocabulary expands, a wide variety of abstract words are added. They move beyond the literal interpretation of words to understand metaphors and other figures of speech. Formal operations permit them to introduce things like sarcasm and irony and to use more elaborate grammatical constructions where they become more effective in analysing and reflecting upon their language. They also become more effective at modifying their language style with subtle changes to fit different situations. Moore and Habel (1982) indicate that students at this age may be in a strong position to recognise distinctions between critical approaches and mythical ones. King (1992) argues that these students may come to see that not everything can be explained factually but there is mystery, reflected in symbolism and contained within religious narratives. Stories are powerful ways of understanding some of the most puzzling aspects of life and have the potential for making, shaping and illuminating one’s own thinking.

Ability to make meaning from biblical literature

Prior discussion indicates that examination of biblical literature with students must be tailored to fit child development theories and to accommodate the historically conscious nature of early twenty-first century society. Contemporary students develop within a strongly rational and critical society that constantly demands proof of phenomena in order to bestow acceptance. The Bible may especially be a difficult text for our children who have been reared with non-traditional understandings (Goldman, 1968). If biblical literature is examined inappropriately as historical narrative without taking the ancient mythical understandings into account, teachers may unwittingly be developing a mini-fundamentalist orientation in some early adolescent students, negating their critical thinking skills and sowing the seeds for future rejection of biblical material (Goldman, 1969). Study of biblical material must not merely read the text for its own sake but should attempt to examine critically the questions of who wrote it, why and in what context, as well as what meanings the text has for postmodern readers and hearers.

Rossiter (1983) suggests that students who engage in learning activities that reflect the knowledge and skills of critical appreciation may be better at demonstrating abilities in understanding and interpreting the Bible’s mythical approaches. Students must distinguish and implement different types of language for different areas of learning. Some learning areas require them to deal with scientific and literal language while they are called to communicate with imagery and metaphorical type language in other subjects (Wright, 1994). Pollio and Pollio (1974) concluded that students needed the powers of abstract thought to explain metaphorical relationships in biblical texts. Metaphors are an integral component of all language, and no less so, biblical language. Students have to be able to develop their understandings in a way that is productive to them and not merely a reflection of another person’s understanding. The ability to construct complex patterns of narratives, myths and metaphors increases students’ understandings of their religious world (Wright, 1994). Malone and Ryan (1994) talk in terms of religious literacy where students can identify and communicate their understandings of religious texts. Johnson (1980) found that the level of metaphor processing depended upon mental capacity and on the learning that accrues with age. Copley et al. (2000) emphasise the importance of culture clues to enable readers to
dialogue with the text and avoid distorted interpretations. Copley (1998) agrees with Bruner (1963) that students should never be taught biblical material in a manner which needs to be unlearned later as this has the potential to damage both the biblical material and the student’s later growth in religious understanding. To reduce any confusion and conflict inherent in such dual thinking, students may benefit from exposure to a critical and rational, but reverent, approach to biblical literature.

The danger exists that, as these students grow from early adolescence into later adolescence with possibly underdeveloped critical biblical skills (Goldman, 1969) and lacking the ability to distinguish historical fact from mythical/religious orientations, they may reject any engagement with biblical material as childish and irrelevant. Conversely, they may continue to adopt fundamentalist, literalist or magical interpretations, failing to recognise symbolic meanings and consequently historicising material that never claimed to be historical (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993). If early adolescents are denied access to informed biblical scholarship and encouraged, either overtly or covertly, to hold crude literal beliefs about biblical narratives, they may reject their religious education as they enter later adolescence on the basis that religious material conflicts with their increasing cognitive abilities and with their perception of their world as rational and analytical with no place for these ‘myths and stories’. Students need help to survive this stage of their learning as they travel towards a more critical view of the bible and a more searching examination of what is meant by ‘truth’. A critical study of biblical texts to complement current mythical/religious approaches within the religious education curriculum, may provide early adolescents with the potential to distinguish whether they are thinking historically or mythically and lead to a firmer grasp of abstract biblical concepts at later stages of maturation.

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